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TANKERS OF V CORPS' 1ST ARMORED DIVISION SHOOT UP GRAFENWOEHR IN MONTH-LONG EXERCISE

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GRAFENWOEHR TRAINING AREA, Germany – The training area here was recently reflagged as “Cav Country” for a month, when the 1st Squadron, 1st U.S. Cavalry of V Corps' 1st Armored Division conducted biannual tank and Bradley Armored Fighting Vehicle gunnery and annual Combat Maneuver Training Center live-fire exercise.

The “Blackhawks’ ” field rotation from mid-January to mid-February served a dual purpose. Its primary intent was to train M1A1 Abrams tank and Bradley crews individually and by platoon. This was done by having crews fire on two levels of training -- gunnery tables VIII and XII. Some say those are the only two tables that matter.



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Spc. Julian Valle, a tank gunner with 1st Armored Division's Bandit Troop of V Corps' 1st Squadron, 1st U.S. Cavalry, 1st Armored Division, bore-sights an M1A1 Abrams tank during Tank Table XII portion of the unit's gunnery rotation in Grafenwoehr, Germany from mid-January to mid-February.

"This is where we test our proficiency in our vehicles," said Staff Sgt. Armando Mendoza, a Bradley commander in Comanche Troop, 1-1st Cavalry, adding that the other tables "are just practice."

The second benefit of the rotation is "providing information for division on what we've learned," said Lt. Col. John Peeler, 1-1st commander.

Table VIII qualification is based on 10 target engagements -- six daytime and four nighttime scenarios.

A crew has to complete seven Ts or Ps -- signifying that the crew is Trained or Needs Practice -- as well as hit one nuclear, biological and chemical engagement and two nighttime engagements to qualify, explained Mendoza.

The other tables include firing various combinations of the vehicles' weaponry. The M1A1's arsenal includes two M240 7.62mm machine guns (one that is coaxial and one that is mounted on the loader's hatch, but can be used for dismounted operations); a .50-caliber machine gun, and a 120mm main gun. The Bradley packs an M240 coaxial machine gun; two anti-armor TOW missiles, and a 25mm main gun.

An extra incentive for the cavalry Soldiers to excel on Table VIII is the "Top Gun" designations that go to one tank and one Bradley crew that shoot best during Table VIII.

"This is decided by who has the most Ts," explained Sgt. Donald Smith, a Bradley gunner with Comanche Troop. "If more than one gun has the same number of Ts, they go by kill times (how quickly a crew knocks down a target.)"

The squadron commander and his crew -- gunner Sgt. Bryan Laessle and driver Spc. William Steaman -- captured the honors as top Bradley gunners.

Tank commander Staff Sgt. Michael Bonesteel and his crew from Apache Troop -- driver Pvt. Joseph McCoy, gunner Spc. Jonathan Owens and loader Pvt. Brian Moore, took top tank crew honors.

The crews hold their titles until the next gunnery rotation.

After crews qualify at Table VIII they continue through gunnery, eventually reaching Table XII, which requires a platoon-sized event, composed of four Bradleys or four tanks, to move together through a series of engagements as a fighting team. To be successful, crews must communicate and work together.

"This is the first collective table in the (gunnery) qualification series," said Capt. Stephen Banks, commander of 1-1st's Bandit Troop.

"Up until this point, training has been done by the individual crew," said Sgt. Ernesto Ortiz, a Bandit Troop tank gunner. "Now we have to make sure to shoot our specific enemies and not our wing man's. Everyone is anxious to make the kill, but we have to hold back a little."

Additionally, while individual training tables give control to the tank commander. Table XII shifts that control.

"Table XII gives platoon leaders the opportunity to command and control their platoons," said Banks.

Table XII, like the other levels of gunnery, consists of day and night engagements. Each platoon fires at roughly 50 hard targets representing structures and vehicles, and 20 troop targets, from stationary and moving positions in various conditions, including an NBC simulation.



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An M1A1 Abrams tank from Bandit Troop of the 1st Squadron, 1st U.S. Cavalry of V Corps' 1st Armored Division fires a round from its 120mm main gun during recent live-fire training at Grafenwoehr, Germany.

"Each tank (and Bradley) is supplied with an adequate amount of ammo for all the weapons," said Staff Sgt. Patrick Chaplin, a Bandit Troop tank commander.

Following gunnery, the cavalry troops transitioned to the CMTC live-fire exercise -
- the "hot" portion of the field rotation

otherwise conducted in Hohenfels, Germany.

"The live-fire is the culminating event in Grafenwoehr," said Peeler. This time the entire troop -- two tank platoons and two Bradley platoons, with field artillery support -- is tested on its combat prowess.

At CMTC in Hohenfels, Soldiers and vehicles are equipped with the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System. "MILES gear" allows combat to be simulated with lasers instead of live ammunition -- the exercise becomes a sort of gigantic game of laser tag.

The Blackhawk squadron won't go to Hohenfels until May, but Peeler explained that CMTC tries to provide units a live-fire once a year and a Hohenfels rotation every 18 months.

The live-fire range presented open ground warfare and urban combat scenarios.

"It was a mix between major combat and the threat base we might see somewhere like Iraq," said Peeler. "The Soldiers got to see low- to high-intensity (combat) all in the same day."

Thanks to the observer-controller staff overseeing the action, the Blackhawks managed to succeed despite the fact that 90 percent of the squadron's Soldiers are brand-new, said Command Sgt. Maj. David Davenport.

"They (the O-Cs) identified weaknesses and we tried to correct the deficiencies," Davenport said.

The bottom line, the sergeant major said, is that the 1-1st Soldiers are trained and prepared for war.

"They know what right looks like," said Davenport.

"The squadron has done an outstanding job getting into the Grafenwoehr training environment," Peeler said.

"We set the standard for what gunnery needs to look like."

But 1-1st officials made it clear that they didn't walk their road to success alone, pointing out the support the unit had from elements of the 55th Personnel Services Battalion; the 127th Aviation Support Battalion; the 123rd Main Support Battalion; the 501st Military Police Company; Grafenwoehr's base support battalion and C Battery, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery Regiment.

"They all came together as part of the Blackhawk team to make the event successful," said Davenport.

With 10 years of tanking under his belt, Chaplin said the most important thing to come from a gunnery exercise knows his crew is a lethal force.

"Knowing you could be called upon to go anywhere and you can count on the men next to you to complete the mission and make it home safely," he said. "That's what makes me come away happiest."

